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DEADWOOD AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BRAD BENZ

In “The New Language of the Old West,” *Deadwood*’s creator and executive producer David Milch offers an extended exposition of the television show’s language:

Language—both obscene and complicated—was one of the few resources of society that was available to these people. . . . It’s very well documented that the obscenity of the West was striking, but the obscenity of mining camps was unbelievable, and there was a reason for that which had to do with the very fundamental quality of their behavior. They were raping the land. They weren’t growing anything. They weren’t respecting the cycles of nature. They were taking. And in order to muscle

up for that enterprise in an environment where there were no laws—you know apes beat their chests a lot so they don’t have to fight twenty-four hours a day—the relentless obscenity of the miner was a way of announcing the compatibility of his spirit with the world in which he found himself. . . . So there was a tremendous energy in the language. And it was the only social form until there was government.¹

Thus, for Milch, discourse functions as a precious “resource” for the miner, a “social form” that mediates their lives. In a lawless camp, language helps organize and govern the miner’s life. Ironically, “the relentless obscenity” sits at the margins of accepted discourse, much like the unincorporated camp itself.

Not surprisingly, the “obscene and complicated” vernaculars spoken on *Deadwood* have garnered much critical attention. Sean O’Sullivan characterizes *Deadwood*’s discourse as a “new style in which Milch fuses the mannered sentence structure of Victorian speech with the colloquialisms and ‘low’ speech of the West.”² Another critic writes: “The language on *Deadwood* ranges from an Elizabethan-like

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ornateness to profanity of a relentlessness that makes *The Sopranos* seem demure. Both extremes often coexist in a single speech."³ Milch and the writers for *Deadwood* do not shy away from this; indeed, they revel in their meta-linguistic awareness. For example, in an episode from the second season, Francis Wolcott explains his disappointment in the contents of a letter he purchased from E. B. Farnum. Farnum replies, "Some ancient Italian maxim fits our situation whose particulars escape me." Wolcott responds, "Is the gist that I'm shit out of luck?" And Farnum asks, "Did they speak that way then?"⁴ Farnum's question provides a framework for this essay: I examine *Deadwood's* discourse within the context of the Western genre, and then address the two dialectal features that have driven so much of the critical commentary about the show: the profane lexicon and the "Shakespearean" dialogue. I do so in an effort to not only answer Farnum's question about language in the Dakota Territory in the 1870s but also to interrogate the transgressive qualities of the language in *Deadwood*.

LANGUAGE IN WESTERNS

Prior to its initial airing, HBO executives balked at the language on *Deadwood*, raising concerns about the profanity-riddled dialogue in particular. In his written response to them, David Milch lobbied to keep the dialogue intact:

If, as seems demonstrable, words like *prick*, *cunt*, *shit*, *fuck*, and *cocksucker* would have been in common usage in the time and place in which *Deadwood* is set, then, like any words, in form and frequency their expression will be governed by the personality of a given character, imagined by the author with whatever imperfection, as the character is shaped and tested in the crucible of experience.⁵

Here Milch uses historical linguistics as justification for the "common usage" of profanity

in the dialogue, as well as artistic license and character development. Perhaps this is not surprising given Milch's literary credentials as a protégé of Robert Penn Warren at Yale University and a graduate from the esteemed Iowa Writer's Workshop. These credentials might also account for the oft-mentioned Shakespearean qualities of the dialogue. On the Shakespearean influence, Milch states: "To the extent people had book learning at that time, they read a lot of Shakespeare. . . . If you read any letters that people wrote during the Civil War, the language is surprisingly elevated even for farmers' letters home."⁶ Once again Milch not only defends *Deadwood's* representation of the English language—both profane and elevated—on historical linguistics, but, as Janet McCabe notes, HBO is akin to the lawless camp *Deadwood* itself, in that HBO is pay television and thus can function outside the strictures of most television dramas.⁷ Viewers will neither encounter this type of dialogue in the majority of Westerns nor will they hear it on network television. Or as McCabe states: "Only on HBO can a series get away with being so rude and crude."⁸

Amanda Ann Klein claims that "the central syntax of the Western genre . . . [is] the archetypal struggle between civilization and savagery."⁹ Klein argues that if a genre is to persist, both sides of the "struggle" must be appealing to viewers, and for the Western genre in general and *Deadwood* in particular, the tension between civilization and savagery is palpable. She elaborates: "These two sides of the Western's central conflict can be represented by numerous antimonies: East versus West, government versus self rule, white man versus Indian, lady or schoolmarm versus prostitute, homesteader versus rancher, garden versus wilderness, compromise versus integrity, etc."¹⁰ I'll add another binary to Klein's list: profane versus refined discourse. Indeed, just as Klein concludes that *Deadwood* mixes the savage and the civilized, *Deadwood's* discourse overtly weaves profane and refined language together in a manner that allows the series to fulfill the viewer's generic expectations of the

Western while also expanding the genre's discursive boundaries at the same time.

In contrast to *Deadwood*, the Western is not commonly revered for its dialogue. Indeed, the stock heroes of the Western embody the tight-lipped, strong, silent type whose actions speak louder than words. In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins writes:

Westerns distrust language. Time and again they set up situations whose message is that words are weak and misleading, only actions count; words are immaterial, only objects are real. But the next thing you know, someone is using language brilliantly, delivering an epigram so pithy and dense it might as well be a solid thing.¹¹

As an example, she cites the sequence in *My Darling Clementine* when Doc Holliday takes over for the drunken actor and completes Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech.¹² Tompkins then catalogues what she calls the "bootlessness of words" in Westerns. For Tompkins, this suspicion of language is an important part of the Western's ideology: "the genre is in revolt against a Victorian culture where the ability to manipulate language confers power, the Western equates power with 'not-language.' And not-language it equates with being male."¹³ That is, like Klein, Tompkins envisions the Western as a response to the Victorian era, to civilization.

Lee Clark Mitchell uses *The Virginian* as his case study for the role of language in the Western, juxtaposing Owen Wister's novel with the 1929 film version. Similar to Tompkins, Mitchell allows that "dialogue has rarely seemed memorable in the [Western] genre," and he then writes, "Wister seriously championed the Virginian's rhetorical mastery as a characteristic western skill."¹⁴ As examples, he cites the tall tale about the lucrative market in frogs and frog legs, and also the Virginian's verbal jousts with Molly, the heroine and love interest in the novel.¹⁵ For Mitchell, *The Virginian* simultaneously fulfills the generic expectations for the Western, while also challenging them.

He writes, "[The Virginian's] valuing of silence, for instance, places him ahead of a long line of laconic Western heroes—even though he is also the novel's master of talk."¹⁶ In a sense, *The Virginian*, like Doc Holliday in *My Darling Clementine*, anticipates the linguistic dexterity in *Deadwood*.

Deadwood's creator, David Milch, adds to the discussion of the role of language in the Western:

So many of the Westerns which you and I grew up seeing really had more to do with the Hays Production Code in the 20s, 30s, and 40s—and it lasted up until 1968. . . . [T]he first principle of the Hays code is: obscenity in word, thought, or deed is an offense to natural law and the laws of God and therefore will not be permitted in films . . . that was the source of the laconic cowboy. A man of few words, but deep and complicated morality who didn't have to fuck with the Hays Code because he didn't talk a lot.¹⁷

For Milch, the Western's distrust of language is as much a product of censored discourse as it is a fondness for silence. As opposed to having the characters speak as they may have actually spoken in the American West, the creation of the strong, silent Western hero artistically circumnavigates the Hays Code.¹⁸

Without question, many of the characters in *Deadwood* have misgivings about language and thus follow the generic model for language. Among others, Sheriff Seth Bullock, Charlie Utter, and Dan Darity are all men of few words. Bullock is a man of action, and part of his character's allure is his reticence for language. As the sheriff, Bullock's few words carry considerable weight, only because his interlocutors know that action—and usually violent action with his fists or his pistol—will follow his words.¹⁹ In contrast, his discomfort with language contributes to his failings as a husband and surrogate father for his dead brother's widow and son.²⁰ Likewise, as Al Swearengen's loyal assassin, Dan Darity generally lets Swearengen do the



FIG. 1. Al Swearengen (Ian McShane) and Mr. Wu (Keone Young). From *Deadwood*, season 1, episode 10, "Mr. Wu." Courtesy of Home Box Office, Inc. (HBO). Photo by Doug Hyun/HBO.

talking, and then dutifully slits throats when called upon.²¹ Charlie Utter shares these traits, as when, for example, he swears at Francis Wolcott in an effort to provoke a fistfight with him.²² Notably, while all three men prefer Tompkins' "not-language," they are also akin to Wister's *Virginian*, in that at various times they employ language in vital ways. Utter gracefully consoles a grieving Joanie Stubbs in the second season after her brothel workers are murdered by Wolcott, and he visits his dead friend Wild Bill Hickok's grave, preferring to voice his concerns to Hickok's tombstone rather than speak them to the living.²³ When Swearengen is bed-ridden with gallstones, Dority confides in Silas Adams, effectively calming a rivalry between the two men.²⁴ Finally, Bullock, despite his nervousness, delivers a speech in his campaign for sheriff in the camp's first election, or in a rare tender moment with his mistress, Alma

Garret, expresses his satisfaction with their affair.²⁵

While some of the characters are reticent to speak, many of the characters on *Deadwood* manipulate language in ways rarely seen in the Western genre. Chief among them is the show's antihero Al Swearengen, but the list also includes the newspaperman A. W. Merrick, the hotelier E. B. Farnum, the proprietor of the upscale brothel Cy Tolliver, the murderous geologist Francis Wolcott, the terminally ill Reverend Smith, the theatre manager John Langrishe, as well as Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, and the prostitute and bookkeeper-in-training Trixie. Indeed, one can even add to this list the leader of the camp's Chinese population Mr. Wu. Although his lexicon is limited to only a handful of English words, most notably *cocksucker*, Wu nevertheless manages to carry on extended

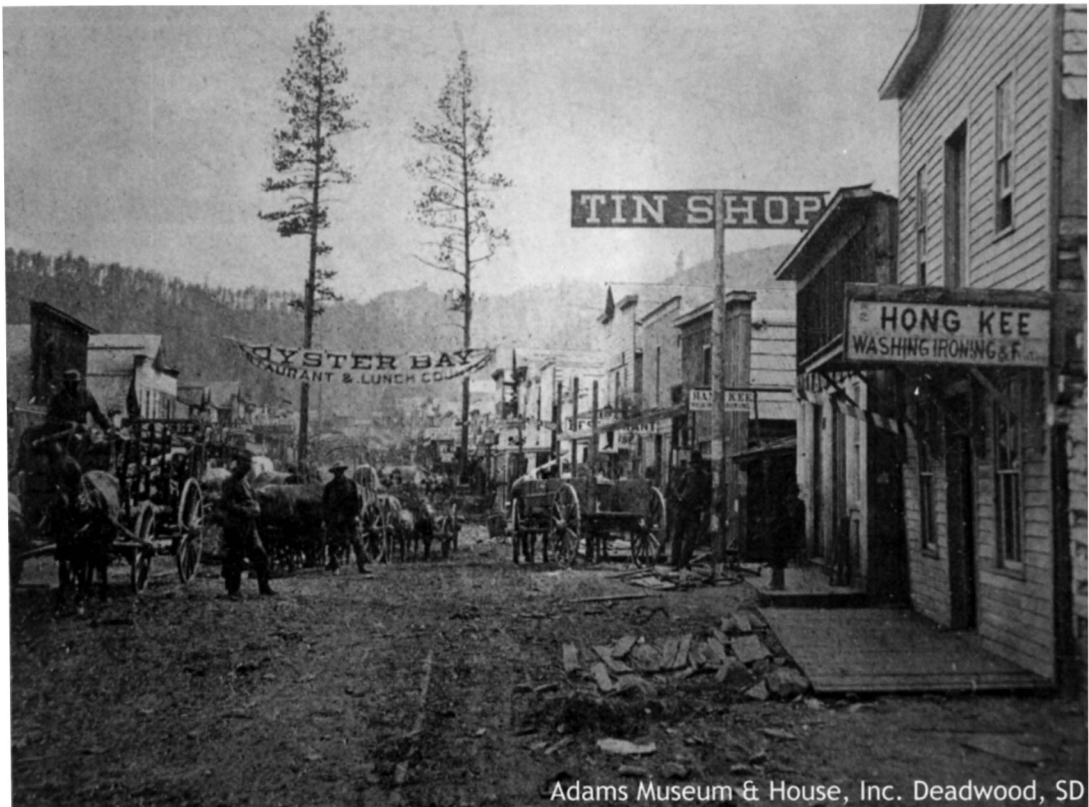


FIG. 2. Early Deadwood seen from Chinatown. Courtesy of the Adams Museum, Deadwood, SD. [70-823b]

discourses with Swearengen.²⁶ What separates *Deadwood*'s discourse from other Westerns is the language itself, whether it be in dialogue, or as O'Sullivan notes, in the soliloquy, the "chestnut of Elizabethan theater."²⁷ *Deadwood* embraces the Western's fondness for silence, while simultaneously leaving considerable terrain for unfettered dialogue, which at times is as rich as the gold in the Black Hills. Quite simply, the Western has never been more verbose than in Milch's reimagining of it.

Calamity Jane illustrates this point as well as anyone. Janet McCabe writes, "[Jane's] florid storytelling, using an anachronistic language associated with the Old West, is spoken in a pared-down, almost inarticulate form associated with the laconic Hollywood hero made reticent by the Production Code."²⁸ At the

same time, Jane's dialogue complicates that form, eclipsing generic expectations considerably. She fits the laconic cowboy stock character, but also, thanks to her dialogue and her gender, transcends it. Consider this exchange between Jane and Trixie:

Jane: [Belches after drinking whiskey] Now that's fucking progress.

Trixie: Cocksucker upstairs across the way. Whorehouse where I work.

Jane: He is a fucking cocksucker.

Trixie: Locks the fucking door so people can't get to help him. Fucking ashamed to be sick.

Jane: You know he had it designed to murder that little one.

Trixie: No, I didn't.



Adams Museum & House, Inc. Deadwood, SD

FIG. 3. *Calamity Jane*. Courtesy of Adams Museum & House, Inc. Deadwood, SD. [70-604].

Jane: Hell yes, he had it designed. Charlie and me spirited her from camp. Forced him to a second victim more suitable to his cocksucker's purpose.

Trixie: Think they're any fucking different if they've had their fucking dicks cut off? They ain't no fucking different. You gotta like their friends or they won't teach you numbers or every other fucking regulation they set.

Jane: Anyways . . .²⁹

These two women curse with vitality and exuberance, and this excerpt epitomizes much of the show's language. Within the confines of the Western genre, however, it does much more. As Kathleen E. R. Smith claims, "Nothing on

Deadwood makes one more of a man than the ability to cuss with distinction and Jane has one of the most amazing repertoires of vulgarities and curse words in the camp, which in some odd way makes her the best man in the camp as well."³⁰

SWEARING IN THE WEST

On historical grounds, the swear words that come so readily out of the mouths of *Deadwood*'s characters did in fact exist. For instance, when discussing mining towns in Montana in the mid-nineteenth century, in his firsthand account Thomas J. Dimsdale states that "one marked feature of social intercourse, and (after indulgence in strong drink) the most fruitful source of quarrel and bloodshed, is the all-pervading custom of using strong language. Men will say more than they mean."³¹ Unfortunately, documentation of "strong language" is difficult to find for reasons similar to the Hays Production Code. For example, early in *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain wistfully reflects on his youthful admiration of the steamboatman, and especially the power of the mate's language: "in the matter of profanity, he was sublime. . . . When he gave even the simplest order, he discharged it like a blast of lightning, and sent a long reverberating peal of profanity thundering after it."³² Twain's mate then gives an order to his crew:

Here, now, start that gang plank for'ard! Lively now! What're you about! Snatch it! Snatch it! There! There! Aft again! Aft again! Don't you hear me? Dash it to dash! Are you going to sleep over it! Vast heaving, vast heaving I tell you! Going to heave it clear astern? Where're you going with that barrel! For'ard with it 'fore I make you swallow it, you dash-dash-dash-dashed split between a tired mud-turtle and a crippled hearse-horse.³³

In deadpan style, Twain concludes, "I wished I could swear like that."³⁴ While this vivid passage helps confirm Milch's claims about

the historical grounds for the profanity in *Deadwood*, few specifics are offered.

One can only imagine how Swearengen would fill in the “dash-dash-dash-dashed” of the mate’s discourse in Twain’s text, but an example of Swearengen’s dialogue exposes the discursive chasm between *Deadwood* and Twain. In this excerpt, Swearengen explains to Wild Bill Hickok why he has offered to purchase the widow Alma Garret’s gold claim:

[Alma’s] husband came here with childish ideas. Bought himself a gold claim with me an honest broker. The claim pinches out which will happen. But he can’t take that like a man. Has to blame somebody. Seller’s left camp so he picks out me. Says he’ll bring in the Pinkertons if I don’t offer restitution. I got a healthy operation here and I didn’t build it brooding on the right and wrong of things. I do not need the Pinkertons descending like locusts so I bend over for the tenderfoot cocksucker. Reconnoiter your claim fully, I say. And then if you’re still unhappy, I will give you your fucking money back. And the tenderfoot agrees. Just as he’s finishing his reconnoiter, cocksucker falls to his death. Pure fucking accident. But up jumps the widow in righteous fucking indignation. Wants the doctor to examine him for murder wounds. My vision of locusts return. I see Pinkertons coming in swarms.³⁵

With its mixture of Western diction, as in *tenderfoot*, *pinches out*, and *Pinkertons*, and the robust swearing, this excerpt represents much of the discourse on *Deadwood* and is exemplary of Swearengen’s in particular. It also stands in stark contrast to Twain’s recollection, which, while it corroborates Milch’s claims about swearing in the West, also makes Milch’s claim about the “common usage” of words like *fuck* and *cocksucker* worth investigating.

As Jesse Sheidlower notes in his book *The F Word*, the earliest written use of *fuck* dates back to 1475.³⁶ Similarly, *Deadwood*’s most popular

swear word, *cocksucker*, was used in 1891, and likely earlier in speech.³⁷ However, a distinction needs to be made, as the linguist Geoffrey Nunberg points out:

Fuck wasn’t actually a swear word back then. It was indecent, of course, but people only used it for the sexual act itself. Whereas, swear words are the ones that become detached from their literal meanings and float free as mere intensifiers. Swearing isn’t using *fucking* when you’re referring to sex, it’s using it when you’re talking about the weather.³⁸

This holds true for *asshole* and *cocksucker* as well: the former is a “bodily orifice” and the latter is “someone who performs fellatio.”³⁹ In semantic terms, these words have undergone generalization of meaning. While *cocksucker* still refers to someone who performs fellatio, when Wu refers to Mr. Lee as “San Francisco cocksucker,” his meaning extends well beyond the physical act and refers to someone who displeases him tremendously.⁴⁰ While there are plenty of literal cocksuckers on *Deadwood*, mostly brothel workers, the majority of the time when *cocksucker* is spoken, it’s being used in the generalized sense.⁴¹

This leads to the question, What was cursing like in *Deadwood* and the rest of the American West in the 1870s? The most common would have been of a religious nature, such as *damn* and *goddamn*. As Nunberg notes, *hell* was especially popular for nineteenth-century Americans, as in sayings like “hell, yes,” “hell to pay,” or “the hell you will.”⁴² The literature of the time supports this: neither Twain’s nor Bret Harte’s stories include *fuck*, but there are many instances of *damn*, many of which aren’t even spelled out fully, using instead *d—n*. For example, in Harte’s “Zut-Ski: The Problem of a Wicked Feme Sole,” one finds “Oh, damn her eyes!”⁴³ In “Golly and the Christian,” in a spot where a *Deadwood* character might say *cocksucker*, a wife tells her husband: “Did it ever occur to you, dearest, that a more ridiculous, unconvincing, purposeless, insane,

God-forsaken idiot than you never existed?"⁴⁴ In a longer stretch of discourse from "M'liss: An Idyll of Red Mountain," Harte writes, "[W]hat's that to you, you young hell-cat? Guard!—damnation!—what do you let her come here for? Do you hear? Guard! . . . take her away! fling her downstairs! What the h—ll is she doing here?"⁴⁵ Harte's examples offer a clearer historical picture—at least in print—of how people swore in the American West at that time.

In *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths, and Profanity in English*, Geoffrey Hughes chronicles the evolution of swearing from the nineteenth to the twentieth century: "it would appear that in Western society the major shifts in the focus of swearing have been from religious matters (more especially the breaching of the commandment against taking the Lord's name in vain) to sexual and bodily functions."⁴⁶ Thus, *Deadwood* mixes the best of both centuries, often in the same monologue. Consider, for example, Wild Bill's mini-monologue to Charlie Utter, in which Hickok wearily expresses his desires to live his final days as he sees fit:

Some goddamn time a man's due to stop arguing with his self, feeling he's twice the goddamn fool he knows he is because he can't be something he tries to be every goddamn day without once getting to dinner time and not fucking it up. I don't want to fight it no more. Understand me Charlie? And I don't want you pissing in my ear about it. Can you let me go to hell the way I want to?⁴⁷

He starts with the more historically accurate *goddamn*: "goddamn time," "goddamn fool," "every goddamn day," but then for effect, history is thrown to the wind with "not fucking it up." And then he closes with "pissing in my ear" and "let me go to hell the way I want to." One result is that the repeated *goddamn*'s are starkly juxtaposed with *fucking it up*, placing even more emphasis on the latter.

Why do *Deadwood*'s characters swear like our twenty-first century contemporaries, as

opposed to Bret Harte's? As Hughes states, "Attitudes toward swearing are not constant."⁴⁸ While the people living in *Deadwood* in the 1870s were arguably more rugged and less literate than westerners today, the societal mores and taboos surrounding profane language were very different, even in a lawless place like *Deadwood*. Thus, as Ruth Wajnryb notes, "'Damn you,' 'God damn,' 'go to hell,' are rather tame curses in today's secular world, but once possibly made the heavens shudder."⁴⁹ Perhaps in an effort to make the heavens shudder, *Deadwood*'s writers use language from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for if the characters on *Deadwood* swore as Twain's and Harte's do, they would not sound very threatening to modern ears.⁵⁰ Indeed, as Nunberg points out, they'd sound more like Yosemite Sam.⁵¹

SHAKESPEAREAN QUALITIES

While Shakespeare never actually uses the word *fuck* in his plays, he does make a few puns which seem to be playing on its taboo nature.⁵² However, when the critics laud *Deadwood*'s dialogue for its Shakespearean qualities, they're likely referring to the complexity of the syntax and the artistry of the language and not the use of profanity. Of this, Milch says:

[When] you read the newspapers of the time, [it is] the most unbearable purple prose, because anyone who was educated, was educated on the Victorian novel so there was the cohabitation of the primitively obscene with this kind of ornate presentation. And what I found was in the documentation . . . their language was still ornate, but it became very vital.⁵³

Without question, the dialogue on *Deadwood* mixes the "primitively obscene with . . . ornate presentation," and thus sounds representative of an earlier period. Moreover, his claims about newspaper discourse of this period are borne out.

One of *Deadwood*'s most loquacious characters is A. W. Merrick, the editor and publisher



FIG. 4. A. W. Merrick (Jeffrey Jones), editor and publisher of the *Deadwood Pioneer*. From *Deadwood*, season 3, episode 32, "Leviathan Smiles." Courtesy of Home Box Office, Inc. (HBO). Photo by Doug Hyun/HBO.

of the *Deadwood Pioneer*. Merrick, like many of the show's characters, is based on an actual resident of Deadwood who cofounded the *Black Hills Pioneer* in 1876. The following excerpt from an article entitled "Assassination of Wild Bill" is taken from the August 5, 1876, *Black Hills Pioneer*, and illustrates Milch's points about newspapers:

The murderer, Jack McCall, was captured after a lively chase by many of our citizens, and taken to a building at the lower end of the city and a guard placed over him. As soon as this was accomplished a coroner's jury was summoned, with C. H. Sheldon as foreman, who after hearing all the evidence, which was to the effect that while Wild Bill and others were seated at a table playing cards, Jack McCall walked in and around

directly back of his victim, and when within three feet of him raised his revolver, and exclaiming "Damn you, take that" fired the ball entering at the back of the head and coming out at the centre of the right cheek, causing instant death, rendered a verdict in accordance with the above facts. . . . Thus [the not guilty verdict] ended the scenes of the day that settled a matter of life and death with one living, whose life was in the hands of twelve fellow-men, whose duty it was to decide upon the guilt or innocence of the accused, charged with the murder of Wild Bill, who while the trial was in progress was being laid in the cold, cold ground in the Valley of Whitewood, by kind hands that were ever ready to administer to his sufferings while living, and ready to perform the painful duty of laying him in his last resting place.⁵⁴

There are many notable elements in this text. First, prior to pulling the trigger, McCall utters, "Damn you, take that" (with *damn* fully spelled out), which further corroborates the authenticity of swearing in the camp. More germane to the inquiry about what Milch calls the "ornateness" of the language, however, is the length and complexity of the syntax.

The first of the three sentences in the excerpt is a coordinate sentence with one appositive. In contrast, the next two sentences are considerably longer with more complex, embedded syntax. Two-thirds of the second sentence is the lengthy relative clause that follows *evidence* and offers a play-by-play of the events transpiring immediately prior to Hickok's murder. The length of the sentence when coupled with its syntactic embedding supports Milch's argument about the ornateness of the era's newspaper discourse. Likewise, the third sentence, with its moralistic overtones on the responsibility of jurors and its maudlin characterization of the "kind hands" burying Hickok in the "cold, cold" Dakota ground, absolutely attempts to tug at the reader's heart strings in the manner of the "purple prose" that Milch discusses.⁵⁵

With this in mind, the dialogue in *Deadwood* embraces the Victorian ornateness as demonstrated in the *Black Hills Pioneer*. Perhaps more than any other character in the series, the widow Alma Garret best embodies Victorian sensibility and speech. The widow Garret came to the camp with her husband, Brom, "the Eastern dude" whose romantic notions about western mining camps bring him and his wife to Deadwood. At the behest of the duplicitous Swearingen, the gullible Brom buys a mining claim, one that Swearingen thinks is "pinched out." However, when Swearingen learns that Brom's claim is rich in "the color," he has Dority murder Brom at the claim, under the auspices of "reconnoitering the rim." At Brom's funeral, Farnum offers to purchase the claim from Alma, who immediately senses foul play. Because of this, a suspicious Alma asks Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane to inspect her gold claim before she sells it:

Alma: I was saying to my husband just last night that we should try to view our time here as one experience bought at a single price. Even though he's murdered I feel that. To stake the boundaries, just that fact is impossible. For one, this camp hasn't any laws or courts. If it did, I've no evidence. I'd have tried to take the thing all whole if they hadn't offered on the claim. To receive their money would be a separate matter, make me an accomplice of another sort.

Wild Bill: How have you been an accomplice till now?

Alma: A wife inevitably feels she's had some part in what befalls her husband. I'm answerable hereafter on different terms. I need to know what I'd be selling them.

Wild Bill: You don't believe the money's to keep the Pinkertons away?

Alma: Why pay me? If it were a ransom to keep the Pinkertons off, why not pay Brom instead of killing him?

Wild Bill: It's this saloon operator you think is pulling the strings.

Alma: Al Swearingen, it was certainly him manipulating Brom.

Calamity Jane: The slimy, limey cock-sucker.

Wild Bill: All right, ma'am, true sounding's not guaranteed, but I'll try for a feel of the bottom.⁵⁶

This sequence has several notable points, one of which is that it's relatively unprofane, but more to the point, it demonstrates the dialogue's Shakespearean qualities.

How is this effect achieved by Milch and the writers? One way is through the syntax, more specifically through the construction of verb phrases. For example, Alma says, "For one, this camp hasn't any laws or courts. If it did, I've no evidence. I'd have tried to take the thing all whole if they hadn't offered on the claim." In this utterance, the auxiliary verb *do* is omitted. While someone in the twenty-first century would likely say, "This camp doesn't have any

laws,” and “I don’t have any evidence,” Alma says, “This camp hasn’t any laws” and “I’ve no evidence.” As a helping verb, one that’s more or less semantically empty but often utilized to create certain constructions in English today, the auxiliary *do* has been used for quite some time, and certainly well before the time of *Deadwood*.⁵⁷ Or more precisely, the people living in Deadwood would have and did use *do* as an auxiliary in their day-to-day lives, and not when they wanted to sound Shakespearean. While these are minute details, they help make the syntax sound antiquated and not entirely unrepresentative of the time. Alma’s dialogue is not an isolated occurrence of this construction, as for example when E. B. Farnum states to Swearingen: “Have you a doubt or misgiving?”⁵⁸ Or when Bullock asks Alma: “Why needn’t we explore your reasons?”⁵⁹ Or when Jimmy Irons asks Swearingen: “Had you any lay by?”⁶⁰ So once again, the writers employ historical linguistics, and to the show’s benefit, I’d say. Indeed, in their research, perhaps *Deadwood*’s writers came across this brief in the Local News section of the July 22, 1876, *Black Hills Pioneer*: “You ‘haven’t time to write?’ Then send a copy of the *Pioneer* back each week, and that will do until you get time.”⁶¹

Nonetheless, when the critics praise the Shakespearean qualities of *Deadwood*’s dialogue, it has more to do with the general artistry of the dialogue and less to do with the historical accuracy of the swearing or the minutia of the syntax. That is, in the sequence above, when Alma responds to Hickok’s query about her being an accomplice, the real dramatic artistry is when she says, “A wife inevitably feels she’s had some part in what befalls her husband. I’m answerable hereafter on different terms.” Or when Hickok closes the deal: “true sounding’s not guaranteed, but I’ll try for a feel of the bottom.”⁶² It’s the synthesis of all these elements—the absent auxiliary *do*, the diction (as in *befalls*), and in the timely profanity—that in Milch’s terms give the language its vitality and ornateness.

CONCLUSION

It’s not surprising that *Deadwood*’s discourse has generated so much critical discussion. As a Western, the language fulfills the viewer’s generic expectations while at the same time transcends them, as it moves from a vigorous vulgarity to a flowery eloquence often in the same sequence. In this sense, the dialogue transgresses the generic boundaries for discourse in Westerns. At the same time, the critical concern about the accuracy of the *Deadwood*’s discourse is especially curious given the genre’s historic inaccuracy in most matters of the American West. Indeed, as Hughes notes, “the idiom of western expansion was tall talk, which in Boorstin’s words, ‘blurred the edges of fact and fiction,’” and tall talk has generally been celebrated as a particularly American discourse.⁶³ It’s worth asking why Twain is not taken to task for stretching the truth. For historical accuracy in *Deadwood*, consider the incorporation of real westerners who lived in Deadwood, like Hickok, Calamity Jane, Swearingen, Utter, Bullock, Merrick, and George Hearst, or even consider the amount of mud in the streets. But in manners of language, *Deadwood*’s discourse creates a distinct new vernacular for the Western genre, one that, like tall talk, blurs fact and fiction, as it liberally mixes language both historic and contemporary. And perhaps the show and the genre are all the better for it. As Milch says, “I want to make it clear that I’ve had my ass bored off by many things that are historically accurate.”⁶⁴

NOTES

1. “The New Language of the Old West,” *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD (New York: HBO Video, 2004). This is an interview between Keith Carradine, who plays Wild Bill Hickok on the show, and David Milch. It is a bonus feature packaged with the complete first season.

2. Sean O’Sullivan, “Old, New, Borrowed, Blue: *Deadwood* and Serial Fiction,” in *Reading Deadwood*, ed. David Lavery (New York: I. B. Tauris and Co., 2006), 125.

3. Mark Singer, "The Misfit: How David Milch Got from *NYPD Blue* to *Deadwood* by way of an Epistle of St. Paul," *New Yorker*, February 14, 2005, 192-205.

4. "New Money," *Deadwood*, The Complete Second Season DVD, directed by Steve Shill (New York: HBO Video, 2005).

5. Singer, "The Misfit."

6. Alan Permagent, "Milch Breathes Life into Characters on *Deadwood*," *Buffalo News*, July 21, 2005, C7.

7. Janet McCabe, "Myth Maketh the Woman: Calamity Jane, Frontier Mythology, and Creating American (Media) Historical Imaginings," in Lavery, *Reading Deadwood*, 64.

8. Ibid.

9. Amanda Ann Klein, "'The Horse Doesn't Get a Credit': The Foregrounding of Generic Syntax in *Deadwood*'s Opening Credits," in Lavery, *Reading Deadwood*, 95.

10. Ibid.

11. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 49.

12. Ibid., 55.

13. Ibid.

14. Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 99.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 119.

17. "New Language of the Old West," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD.

18. For information on the Hays Code and the rise of swearing in films since the late 1960s, see Timothy Jay, *Cursing in America: A Psycholinguistic Study of Dirty Language in the Courts, in the Movies, in the Schoolyards, and on the Streets* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1992), 216-34.

19. Bullock is clearly comfortable using violence. For example, in episode 1, season 1, he is responsible for the hanging of a criminal in Montana and at least partly responsible for the death of the man involved in the slaughter of the Metz family. In episode 13, season 2, he and Swearingen's fistfight begins in Swearingen's office before they topple off the deck and into the mud of the main thoroughfare. Elsewhere, Bullock beats Alma Garret's father, Otis Russell, nearly to death in the final episode of season 1, and Bullock does the same thing to E. B. Farnum in episode 25, season 3. Respectively: "Deadwood," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD, directed by Walter Hill; "A Lie Agreed Upon, Part 1," *Deadwood*, The Complete Second Season DVD, directed by Ed Bianchi; "Sold Under Sin," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD, directed by Davis Guggenheim; "Tell Your God

to Ready for Blood," *Deadwood*, The Complete Third Season DVD, directed by Mark Tinker.

20. Interestingly, Bullock's success as a silent lawman informs the viewer's understanding of his failure as a husband. Bullock's inability to communicate with his wife is coupled with his sexual inaction with his wife. This is also in contrast to his adulterous relationship with Alma Garret, a widow with whom Bullock does communicate. Indeed, in an interview with *Salon*, Milch is asked if Bullock is "more tortured than Swearingen," and he replies, "Yes, exactly. [Bullock] will not share himself in the same way." Heather Havrilesky, "The Man Behind *Deadwood*," *Salon*, March 5, 2005.

21. For example, Swearingen has Dority execute Tim Driscoll, the original owner of the Garret claim. "Deadwood," episode 1, season 1.

22. "E. B. Was Left Out," *Deadwood*, The Complete Second Season DVD, directed by Michael Almerayda.

23. "I Am Not the Man You Take Me For," *Deadwood*, The Complete Third Season DVD, Season 3, directed by Dan Attias; "Childish Things," *Deadwood*, The Complete Second Season DVD, directed by Timothy Van Patten. Among other things, Utter reveals his concerns about Calamity Jane's drinking to Hickok's grave.

24. "Requiem for a Gloat," *Deadwood*, The Complete Second Season DVD, directed by Alan Taylor.

25. "I Am Not the Man You Take Me For," *Deadwood*, The Complete Third Season DVD, directed by Dan Attias. Bullock, like the other candidates for office, is clearly nervous about his speech but adamant about the importance of the elections. "A Lie Agreed Upon, Part 1," *Deadwood*, The Complete Second Season DVD, directed by Ed Bianchi.

26. Regarding the limited number of swear words, Ruth Wajnryb claims, "The fact is there are more swearing functions to perform than there are swear words to use; to put it differently, lots of targets but a scarcity of ammunition." Ruth Wajnryb, *Expletive Deleted: A Good Look at Bad Language*. (New York: Free Press, 2005), 15.

27. O'Sullivan, "Old, New, Borrowed, Blue," 125.

28. McCabe, "Myth Maketh the Woman," 69.

29. "New Money," *Deadwood*, The Complete Second Season DVD.

30. Kathleen E. R. Smith, "Whores, Ladies, and Calamity Jane: Gender Roles and the Women of HBO's *Deadwood*," in Lavery, *Reading Deadwood*, 90.

31. Cited in Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1969), 372.

32. Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 26.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. "Here Was a Man," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD, directed by Alan Taylor.
36. Jesse Sheidlower, ed., *The F Word* (New York: Random House, 1995), xxv.
37. *Cocksucker* is defined as "a feliatrix" in a slang dictionary. It likely existed in speech well before this date. John S. Farmer and William E. Henley, *Slang and Its Analogues, Past and Present* (New York: Dutton, 1890-1904). This was subsequently reissued as *A Dictionary of Slang*.
38. Geoffrey Nunberg, "Obscenity Rap," <http://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/~nunberg/deadwood.html> (accessed June 20, 2004).
39. Ibid.
40. "Something Very Expensive," *Deadwood*, The Complete Second Season DVD, directed by Steve Shill.
41. In another example of the show's meta-linguistic awareness, the writers playfully use *cocksucker* in its literal sense as well. When Joanie Stubbs is tending to the wounded Tolliver, Con Stapleton comments to Leon that she's akin to Florence Nightingale. Leon corrects him: "Florence Nightingale was a nurse. Joanie Stubbs is a cocksucker." "Tell Your God to Ready for Blood," *Deadwood*, The Complete Third Season DVD, directed by Mark Tinker.
42. Nunberg, "Obscenity Rap."
43. Bret Harte, "Zut-Ski: The Problem of a Wicked Feme Sole," in *Condensed Novels Second Series: New Burlesques*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext00/nbrlq10.txt>.
44. Bret Harte, "Golly and the Christian," in *Condensed Novels Second Series: New Burlesques*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext00/nbrlq10.txt>.
45. Bret Harte, "M'liss: An Idyll of Red Mountain," in *Condensed Novels Second Series: New Burlesques*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext00/nbrlq10.txt>.
46. Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths, and Profanity in English* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 237.
47. "Here Was a Man," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD.
48. Hughes, *Swearing*, 256.
49. Wajnryb, *Expletive Deleted*, 119.
50. As Sheidlower points out, the word *fuck* wasn't even printed in the United States until 1926, and then it was used in its literal sense in soldier Howard Vincent O'Brien's *Wine, Women, and War*, his diary from the Great War. Sheidlower, *The F Word*, xxii.
51. Nunberg, "Obscenity Rap."
52. For a discussion of swearing in Shakespeare, see Hughes, *Swearing*, 108-16. For an analysis of Shakespearean discourse regarding female sexuality, especially in puns and riddles, see William C. Carroll, "Language and Sexuality in Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare and Sexuality*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14-34.
53. "New Language of the Old West," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD.
54. "Assassination of Wild Bill," *Black Hills Pioneer*, August 5, 1876.
55. All of these sentences are taken from the same article, "Assassination of Wild Bill," *Black Hills Pioneer*, August 5, 1876.
56. "Here Was a Man," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD.
57. As Jeremy Smith notes, the *do*-periphrasis emerges at the end of the Middle English period "as an alternative mode of expression to signal causation or past tense," and by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries *do* "underwent a marked widening of usage." To illustrate the use of *do* as a grammaticalized form, notice how Shakespeare creates the negative declarative sentence with and without *do* in *Julius Caesar*: "But I fear him not: / Yet if my name were liable to fear, / I do not know the man I should avoid / So soon as that spare Cassius" (act 1, scene 2). Another pairing from *Julius Caesar* illustrates the role of *do* in question formation: "Knew you not Pompey?" (act 1, scene 1) versus "Did Cicero say any thing?" (act 1, scene 2). Jeremy J. Smith, *An Historical Study of English: Function, Form, and Change* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 143, 159-61. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1599, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/MobJuli.html>.
58. "Reconnoitering the Rim," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD, directed by Davis Guggenheim.
59. "Suffer the Little Children," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD, directed by Dan Minahan.
60. "Mr. Wu," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD, directed by Dan Minahan.
61. These same lines appear in other editions of the *Pioneer*, always in the Local News section.
62. "Here Was a Man," *Deadwood*, The Complete First Season DVD.
63. Hughes, *Swearing*, 167.
64. "The Real Deadwood," <http://www.hbo.com/deadwood/behind/therealdeadwood.shtml>.